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## Guardians of living history: The persistence of the past in post-Soviet Estonia

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# Guardians of Living History

The persistence of the past in post-Soviet Estonia

*It was autumn 2007, when I found myself in the sauna with Anna (born 1987), at her parents' place in Rakvere, a small city in the north of Estonia. As the sauna is the place where emotional stories are being shared, she started to speak about her family. "My grandmother tells me stories about how Estonians were deported," Anna spoke silently. Suddenly she began to complain about the Russian minority which does not want to learn the Estonian language: "I was once in Tallinn in a shop and wanted to buy white bread. The cashier was not able to understand me." She returned to her family stories. In order to explain to me, a young Western European, how terrible these Soviet deportations to Siberia in the 1940s had been for her family and the Estonian people in general, Anna continued: "The German period was great (1941-1944). My relatives also say that."*

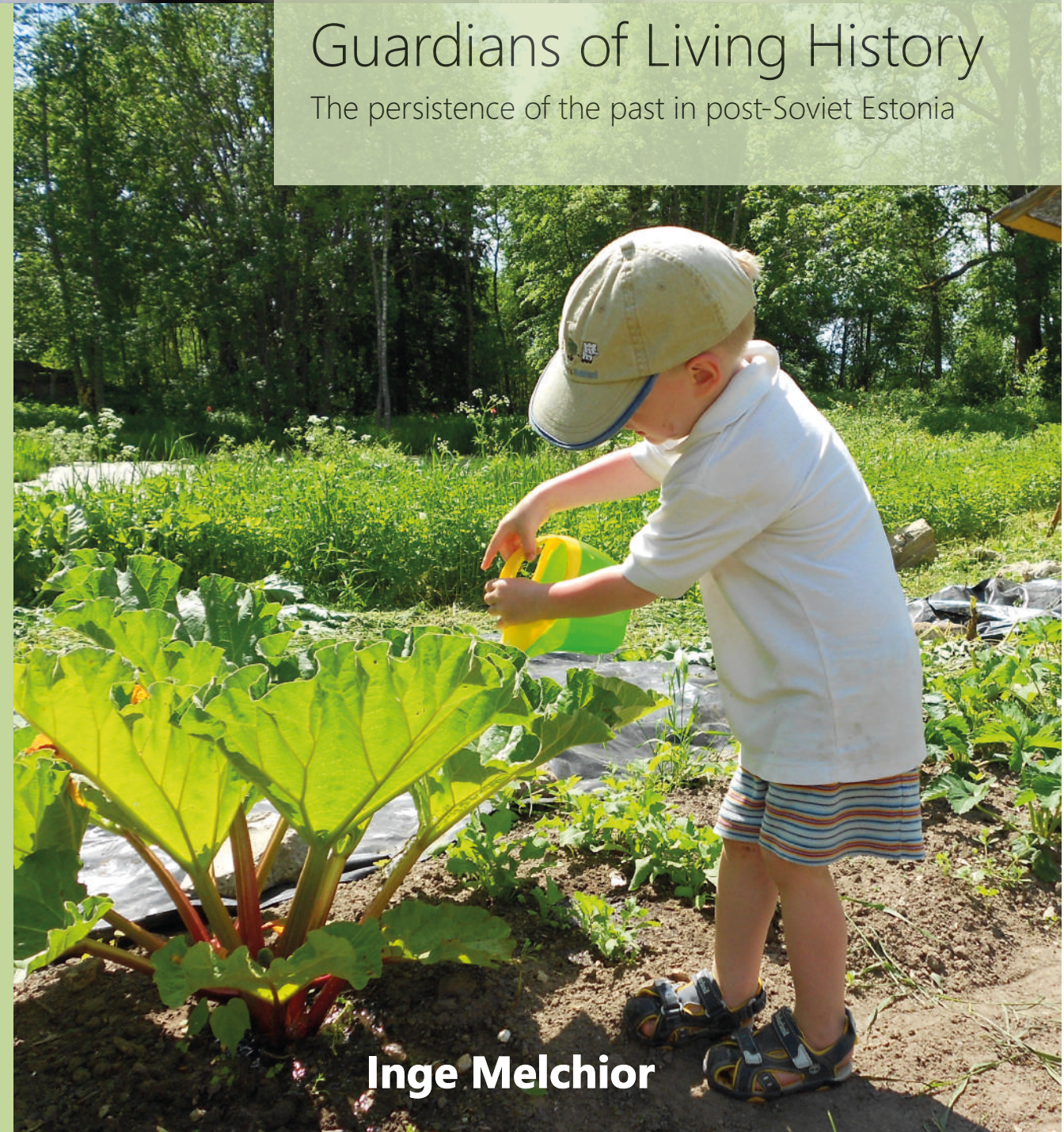
2007 was the year that the 'Bronze Soldier' – a WWII memorial erected in 1947 by the Soviet authorities – was relocated from Tallinn's city center to a cemetery in the outskirts. A clash between Russia and Estonia was the result, but also between ordinary ethnic Estonians and Russian-Estonians. It was as if salt was poured in old wounds, which coloured the present in a different light. For Estonians of all ages – including young highly educated people like Anna – the past was suddenly present, it was there, and they had to deal with it.

In this thesis I interrogate how people that live in a society with an extremely complicated, violent past and only a short history of independence engage with the past, both within their families as well as members of a national community. In line with other memory scholars, I show that many of my informants desire an established collective story, especially because they live their lives in a society where they feel their national identity is quite regularly in threat. At the same time however, I argue that that same closure is perceived to pose a threat to the preservation of Estonian culture and independence. This thesis provides an intimate insight in the lives of my informants, living in the margins of Europe, who all in their own ways act as guardians of a national history; a history which they wish to keep alive and as close to their family stories as possible.

INGE MELCHIOR has a background in Sociology and Cultural Anthropology, and finished the research master Social and Cultural Science at Radboud University Nijmegen. She completed her PhD research at the Social and Cultural Anthropology department of VU University in Amsterdam.

Guardians of Living History

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